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Cressida Campbell

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Preview **ELLI WALSH**

WHEN THE QUEEN OPENED THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA (NGA) ON 12 OCTOBER 1982, A YOUNG CRESSIDA CAMPBELL STOOD EXCITEDLY IN THE AUDIENCE. FOUR DECADES LATER, THE MUCH-LOVED AUSTRALIAN ARTIST IS HONOURED WITH A SURVEY SHOW AT THE NGA, COMMEMORATING THE INSTITUTION'S FORTIETH BIRTHDAY AND CELEBRATING THE HUMBLE VIRTUOSITY OF CAMPBELL'S OUTPUT.

Plastered across the press release for this survey show is a quote: "Every artist has their language – any half-decent artist has their particular handwriting, as Margaret Olley used to say – and it's showing people how to see your vision of the world." This sentiment, of vocabulary and vision, is true for all artists of course, but Cressida Campbell shows us hers with a clarity and continuity that feels radical in an art world that champions extreme evolution and big stylistic strides in an artist's career.

Campbell's long-spoken visual language is, indeed, singular and steadfast. Working from her backyard studio, the artist has been creating single edition prints and painted woodblocks for over forty years, capturing quotidian scenes from her home and local surroundings in Warrang/Sydney. There's a circularity in her oeuvre, with recurring themes and scenes forming a personal taxonomy of images siphoned, always, from her own life. It seemed only logical, then, for curator Dr. Sarina Noordhuis-Fairfax (Curator of Australian Prints and Drawings) to present the exhibition



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thematically, across six spaces, with groupings including still life, views within Campbell's home, and local landscapes.

Campbell's hybrid technique of painting-printing began in her late teens, during her second year at Sydney's National Art School, when she decided to study printmaking (in reaction to the broad-brush craze propelling the painting faculty at the time). Under the guidance of her teacher Leonard Matkevich, Campbell started experimenting with woodblocks – developing a technique that welded her love of drawing and painting fine detail with the textures and tactility of woodcut printing. Initially small editions were printed using an etching press, but Campbell soon refined this technique, hand-printing a single impression from the painted woodblock and then retouching and painting each print – never from life, always imagination. In the exhibition, supplementary works from art school alongside painting ephemera from her studio and a documentary screening take us into the history and complexity of Campbell's process.

An intuitive and vivacious colourist, Campbell paints all her tones onto the carved block at once, rather than the typical woodblock process where ink is used, and a different block for each colour. For Campbell, her painted blocks are as valid artistically as the finished prints – seeing the beauty, as is her way, in a thing conventionally disregarded. She has been exhibiting these blocks alongside her prints since 1986, many of which are presented at the NGA, borrowed from various private collections, which have been off public display for decades.

Art and life, it seems, are inseparable for Cressida Campbell. When viewed together across more than 140 pieces in this show, her woodblocks and prints form a jigsaw of memories, moods, and milestones. Some pieces are missing, undoubtedly, but we are still made privy to the inner world of a profoundly permeable soul. Campbell's private opticality – her unique lenses of observation and translation – speaks softly of the profundity of mundanity and the vast subjectivity of perception. Her interior scenes transport us into her home, not as a guest but as a ghost, floating through

rooms untidy and moments raw, intimate. As we move through, we glimpse her loved collections of ukiyo-e prints, Indigenous art, Persian carpets, eclectic ceramics, Islamic art, and textiles designed by her sister, Sally.

These works blush with the *jouissance* of life, of living, as Campbell celebrates transitory moments. They are like inverse memento moris; reminders not of mortality but of the vitality to be found in, well, everything – stacked dishes and compost scraps, burnt bushland and rusty shipping containers, an electric fan, a plate of ripening persimmons . . . Campbell's list is endless. We are aware of time and temporality, yet there is the sense that moments and memories can last forever – in representation and remembrance. Campbell's unlikely protagonists narrate

01 *Night interior*, 2017, woodblock, painted in watercolour, 220 x 100 cm, photographed by Warren Macris

02 *Bush remnants*, 1986, woodcut, printed in watercolour, 79 x 64.5 cm, photographed by Warren Macris

03 *Studio*, 1989, woodcut, printed in watercolour, 90 x 96 cm



04

“ Her interior scenes transport us into her home, not as a guest but as a ghost, floating through rooms untidy and moments raw, intimate ”

her extraordinary way of seeing, where leftovers on a plate are compositionally exciting, and furniture rearranged offers endless pictorial possibilities. She is an artist who appreciates the design of life's minutiae, something Campbell has adopted from the ethos of the Japanese artists she admires – Utamaro and Hokusai, Harunobu and Eisen, to name a few.

Presented at the NGA are some of Campbell's earliest works, including childhood drawings, revealing a young artist fascinated with landscapes, nature, plants, gardens, and the Australian bush. *Bush remnants*, 1986, from the NGA collection, introduces Campbell's eye for the ordinary, and the spontaneous. With a conventionally awkward crop and superbly harmonic tonalities, *Bush remnants* establishes colour and composition as the cornerstones of Campbell's sustained approach. She composes her stylised images using a vast knowledge of Japanese ukiyo-e printmaking – with its emphasis on nature, detail, colour, and the everyday – tempered with often playful subject matter or scale reflecting the artist's dry humour. In Campbell's works we also glimpse stylistic gestures to early Italian work like Uccello, the English artist Stanley Spencer, Henri Matisse, and Margaret Preston.

Compositionally, obstructed views have always interested Campbell. We see this in another early woodcut in the show, *Through the Windscreen*, 1986, which was inspired by the graphic sentiment of John Brack, and more specifically his painting *The car*, 1955. Also part of the NGA collection, this work captures a moment in Campbell's late husband Peter's Volkswagen, parked in Greenwich where the artist grew up. Through the window we see Shell's giant gas cylinders and industrial equipment, fringed by bushland. Another work presented, *Francis Street, East Sydney*, 2000, seats the viewer on a hidden armchair before an open balcony, drawing our attention to the play of lines splicing and shaping the vignettted street view. We see that everything around us is inherently linear – trees, buildings, doors, roads, railings, power lines, even patterns on a tea towel. It is through these partial perspectives that Campbell illuminates the detail and delight of humble, overlooked moments. In her world, ennui becomes extraordinary.

Though not presented chronologically, this exhibition elucidates a shift from earlier flat, graphic works to the more detailed images of the last decade or so. Recent works like *Night interior*, 2017, and *Lotus*, 2019, reveal an increased focus on light, reflection, and mood, tied to major changes

in Campbell's life. They are flushed with quietude and a temporal stillness that comes only with age.

The NGA's major summer exhibition in their anniversary year feels, somehow, comforting, homey, and humble. “I hope audiences love the beauty and honesty of it all,” comments Noordhuis-Fairfax. “Given that these everyday subjects are familiar to many of us, I think that the exhibition can inspire us to take another look at our own world. Campbell is following Degas's dictum ‘never paint anything you don't love,’ and she has applied this fascination to everything she encounters. It's a very attentive and appreciative way to live your life.” This is, indeed, Cressida's world – but it is also our own. The poetry of our own everyday. In and through Campbell's works, we are beckoned to stop, look, look again, look deeper, and truly see. ■

EXHIBITION

Cressida Campbell
24 September 2022 – 19 February 2023
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

04 *Through the windscreen*, 1986, woodcut, printed in watercolour, 48.8 x 60.8 cm

Courtesy the artist, Mosman Art Gallery, Sydney, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane